

Old Testament Theology

I was asked to write about “Old Testament Theology,” which can mean different things. This is what it means to me. First, it doesn’t mean studying everything that Israelites had written before Jesus’ time. It means studying the writings that were included in “the Old Testament.” Studying other Jewish writings is useful and they can help understanding, but they don’t have the same status. It’s the Old Testament Scriptures that Christians recognize as designed to shape our thinking and our lives.

Second, studying the “Old Testament” implies looking for the understanding of God and other matters that the books themselves presuppose and advocate. That’s different from studying the actual beliefs that were held by Israelites in different periods. In other words, there is a difference between studying Israel’s religion and studying the Old Testament’s theology, just as there is a difference between what modern Christians believe and what Christian faith essentially is.

Third, talking about an “Old” Testament implies that there is a “New” Testament. Although Jews accept these same scriptures, they don’t describe them as the “Old Testament.” The trouble with the term “Old Testament” is that it suggests old and out-of-date; I prefer the term “First Testament.” Yet “First Testament” also presupposes a link with another Testament. But thinking about “Old Testament Theology” on its own implies that we treat the way these books think about things semi-independently from the New Testament.

Fourth, talking about “Old Testament Theology” implies that a one coherent theology can be inferred from the Old Testament, even though varied theologies are expressed in different writings within it. We don’t then choose between these different theologies. Rather we assume that the differences are clues to something more complex than the theology of any individual writing. It also presupposes that there is no marked theological development within the Old Testament. Revelation is not progressive. We don’t assume that later insight is more profound than earlier insight. Sometimes the opposite is true.

It’s a Story

When you start reading the Old Testament, its first striking feature is that it takes the form of a story. It’s not like reading a modern theology book. The key statements in Old Testament Theology take narrative form. They are that God created the world, nearly destroyed it, made promises to Abraham, rescued the Israelites from Egypt, re-sealed a covenant with them at Sinai, brought them to Canaan, made a commitment to Jerusalem and to the temple, tolerated them over the centuries, let Jerusalem be destroyed, restored the city and the people, and subsequently persisted with them again and rescued them from oppressors again. While we can turn these narrative statements into abstract ones (God is one who makes promises, who rescues from bondage, and so on), their narrative, historical nature is important to Old Testament Theology.

One implication is that being the church means setting ourselves in the context of this story and understanding ourselves as a later stage in this story. Another is that

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we don't assume that everything that happened once is designed to happen again – for example, God telling Joshua to slaughter the Canaanites. Another is that nevertheless we can't ignore the Jewish people, because most of the Bible is dominated by their story. That doesn't mean we support the state of Israel over against the Palestinians. It does mean we make a point of watching for anti-Semitism in ourselves and in other people.

The One God

On the eve of getting the Israelites out of Egypt, God revealed himself to Moses as “Yahweh.” A key theological conviction in the story is that Yahweh is the one God. The point isn't simply that there is only one God. “Monotheism” isn't a category that the Old Testament works with. It does declare that Yahweh alone is God, but it believes more in what you could call mono-Yahwism than in monotheism. Christian theologians came to emphasize monotheism because Greek philosophy was concerned with the question whether there was a unity about reality. But Israel's question wasn't how many gods there were, but who is God – is Marduk God, or is Baal God, or is Yahweh God? Saying that Yahweh alone is God implies that there is only God, but to call that monotheism is to miss the point.

As the one God, Yahweh owns the whole world and intends to be acknowledged by the whole world. While the Old Testament largely focuses on Israel, the framework for its thinking about Israel is God's position as creator and owner of the whole world. Thus Israel's story opens with God's involvement with the whole world, and God's involvement with Israel issues from God's commitment to bless Abraham in such a way that the whole world will seek the same blessing. The Psalms keep declaring that all the nations are to acknowledge Yahweh, not least through seeing what Yahweh does with Israel. Many of the prophets look forward to a day when that intent will be realized. The Old Testament thus has a positive view of God's relationship with individual nations, though it takes a dim view of empires or superpowers, which by their nature are inclined to pretend to quasi-deity. It also makes no assumptions about its being appropriate for one nation to get involved in the affairs of another nation.

The Old Testament assumes that in creating the whole world and in creating humanity, God hard-wired humanity with awareness of who God is and of the basics of right and wrong. Humanity didn't have to wait for the Ten Commandments to know that murder and adultery are wrong. Further, the way God expects Israel's politics to be based on trust in God and in the victory of right over wrong isn't just a principle for Israel's life; it's a principle for any nation's life.

What Is the One God Like?

Yahweh is characterized by commitment, faithfulness, and mercy, but also by willingness to be tough with rebellion. There is a common Christian assumption that the Old Testament God is wrathful and the New Testament God is merciful. Both parts of that assumption are mistaken. It is the New Testament God who sends trillions of people to Hell and who says that forgiveness is limited to people who forgive others; the New Testament God is wrathful. It is the Old Testament God who perseveres with Israel century after century despite its waywardness, so that

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the cross is the logical end term of the way God related to Israel over the centuries. While the Old Testament affirms that God can act wrathfully, when God does so it is alien to God's real character; it does not come from God's heart (Isaiah 28:21; Lam 3:33).

The Basis for a Nation's Relationship with God

The Old Testament does focus on Yahweh's involvement with Israel, even though Yahweh insists on being acknowledged by the whole world. That involvement with Israel is based on God's choice of this people. The Old Testament gives no explanation for that choice of Israel (for instance, in Israel's holiness or potential). If anything it denies that there were reasons of that kind. It was a free choice. Theologically, you could say it was based on God's grace. Israel's commitment to Yahweh is necessary to the relationship between the two parties, but it has the character of a response to God's taking hold of Israel. It is not a basis for God's taking hold of Israel. Thus the relationship is not based on law as opposed to grace; God takes the initiative in the relationship, though Israel's response is necessary for the relationship to work. Further, Israel's unresponsiveness cannot terminate the relationship unless God allows it to do so.

God's choice of Israel was unique to it. God did not choose Britain and God did not choose the United States. There is no exceptionalism. Indeed, the fact that Yahweh is so suspicious of superpowers is one of the most important theological facts for Western people in our day.

While primarily involved with Israel as a people, God also relates to individuals. The Psalms illustrate the direct nature of this relationship, portraying the individual's freedom in relating to God in praise, protest, and trust. People relate to Yahweh like children to a father. The Psalms and the Torah also presuppose the moral responsibility of the individual as well as that of the community. In the Western world, we can see the need to keep a balance between these, but there is another factor in the Old Testament. The responsibility of the nation had less impact on ordinary people than the responsibility of the local community. Justice, the resolution of conflict, community development, care for the needy, and worship were largely local community affairs.

Work

Yahweh's involvement with a people and not just with individuals issues in the people's having a relationship with a particular land. God makes a gift of land to the people and oversees its allocation to individual clans, who then allocate it to families. The land is then both gift and responsibility. God's working out his purpose in connection with this particular land makes it appropriate that the Jewish people is indissolubly attached to this land, though again that does not imply a quick fix to modern political problems.

It is impossible to sell land; it belongs to God, and God lets human beings be his tenants on his land. Land belongs to (extended) families, and the family is the nation's working unit. There is no such thing as employment, as selling your labor, unless you are a person who has for some reason fallen out of the family structuring

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of society and who is then taken on as an honorary member of a family. There is no such thing as trade; Isaiah 23 calls trade “prostitution.” The exchange of goods is designed to work within the context of community relationships not to be a way of making money. Likewise lending is a means of helping someone who is in difficulties get out of their difficulties, not a means of making money.

The Old Testament’s central moral idea is faithfulness. The word for faithfulness, *sedaqah*, is commonly translated “righteousness,” but this gives a misleading impression. The idea of *sedaqah* is that of doing the right thing by one’s relationship with other people in one’s community. The related idea is *mishpat*, which is commonly translated “justice,” but this also gives a misleading impression. The idea of *mishpat* is that of having power to take decisive action. The Old Testament thus reframes the modern idea of social justice, which derives from European thinking.

Hope

The Old Testament is interested in the fulfillment of Yahweh’s purpose for Israel and for the world but this concern does not express itself in much interest in a Messiah. The Old Testament does talk about a person to come, but there is no technical term for this person. It puts more emphasis on the fulfillment of God’s purpose by God than on its fulfillment through a descendant of David.

Likewise it emphasizes this life rather than life after death. Humanity was created to serve God and serve the earth. From the earth humanity would gain its food, one of the Old Testament’s major theological themes. The creation of the family enables humanity to serve God and serve the earth. There are virtually no references in the Old Testament to an expectation that people who belong to God will experience resurrection or eternal life. The Old Testament does not fret about death being the end. It accepts God’s vision of a full life in God’s world and then of rest in Sheol. It is not wrong in its portrayal, because only after Jesus’ death and resurrection will the possibility of resurrection life arise.

The biggest hindrance to understanding the Old Testament is our assumption that we are right in our worldview and thus in either making the Old Testament conform to us or in dismissing it when it does not do so.